Sex appeal in 1920-30 came after WWI. These two decades are notorious for, but not limited to, alcohol prohibition, gangsters, euphoric exuberance, Depression, and the First Sexual Revolution. The main difference between 1920s and the preceding Victorian era, puritanical and orderly, is the extraordinal revolution in many social aspects, including the politics, family life, work, and leisure. In particular, the change in status of women was the most remarkable one. This short-lived decade, a time wasted in narcotic dream of fun, blaze, and whisky, was quickly succeeded by a decade of modesty and economic thrift. Nevertheless, the irreversible train of sexual liberation could not be halted, and this was greatly imprinted in advertising.

The 1920s can be branded as “The Flapper Era”. The era was characterized by the emergence of the Flapper girl:

She takes a man’s point of view as her mother never could, and when she loses she is not afraid to admit defeat, whether it be a prime lover or $20 at auction… She will never make you a hatband or knit you a necktie… She’ll don knickers and go skiing with you… she’ll drive you as well, perhaps better; she’ll dance as long as you care to, and she’ll take everything you say the way you mean it…[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Flapper girl was a product of WWI. She grew under the stress of war realities: her husband/brother/father went to war and she had to work to earn extra income. Before the War men were the ones that were mostly thought of as breadwinners, while women would stay at home and bring up children, according to Victorian virtues. The War made irrevocable changes in social complexion of the American society as well as turned emotional well-being of many people towards pessimism: “We have been forced to live in an atmosphere of ‘to-morrow we die,’ and so, naturally we drank and were merry…”[[2]](#footnote-2). Earning extra disposable income during the War enabled women to view themselves from the perspective of the consumer: they had the money to spend on durable goods, leisure, and, most importantly, a sign of freedom – the automobile. Ford mass-produced his cars in an inexpensive manner so that the young girls started to afford the automobile. This changed the attitude towards courtship and dating: “In other days the boy paid court to his ‘girl’ on an ivied porch or in a cosy parlor, under the watchful eyes of a mother or the stricter vigil of a maiden aunt”[[3]](#footnote-3). Because by 1927 most cars were enclosed, this factor influenced changes in women’s sexuality and their attitude towards sexual behavior.

Women in the post-WWI era rapidly gain freedoms they had not had before the War. In 1920 the Nineteenth Amendment allowed women to vote. Women started to feel their importance in the society: “They were given a privilege that their mothers never were during their youthful years, already giving Flappers inspiration that they could be equal with men”[[4]](#footnote-4). As a result, they were “apt to claim the virtues and ape the vices of men”[[5]](#footnote-5). The older generation was unhappy with the Flappers: “their parents believed that their energy was focused in the wrong direction. They focused on, as a female member of the older generation stated, “‘a frivolous pursuit of fun rather than trying to better their sex and their race’”[[6]](#footnote-6). However, young women were still in after-war shock and did not receive due support from the older generation. As one young Flapper summarized the attitude of her social group: “You must help us…The war tore our spiritual foundations and challenged our faith. We are struggling to regain our equilibrium”[[7]](#footnote-7). The older generation did not use the right tools to bring the youth under the morals of the past. Instead, dating became an extracurricular activity: “dating shifting from a quaint supervised meeting, into a system in which the two enjoyed themselves without a chaperone at a social or public amusement event”[[8]](#footnote-8). As a consequence, elements crucial for such activities were elevated to new standards: women now desired slim bodies that “expected to give and receive sexual pleasure”[[9]](#footnote-9), wanted to smoke; rid of B.O. (body odour), bad breath; have extraordinarily clean clothes. On top of that, all this was fuelled by the increasing female market: “by 1930, 10.8 million women held paying jobs, an increase of 2 million since [the] war’s end”[[10]](#footnote-10). Advertisers undoubtedly took advantage of this combination of factors.

The Flapper era was short-lived: it practically ended by 1930 with the collapse of the stock market and evaporation of credit, which had been a major driver of 1920s consumer economy. Inflation in necessities left little space in women’s budget, disabling them to adhere to the Flapper’s fashion. It became more important to sustain a somewhat normal lifestyle, rather than profess and express newly patched women’s freedoms, while further easing moral and social freedoms. Women found it more convenient to “be partially dependent on a partner, especially one who showed romance and compassion”[[11]](#footnote-11). Somewhat shuttered values of family were somewhat regaining value in the American society, especially among the aging Flappers. Nevertheless, the legacy of 1920s did not evaporate a decade later: views on dating and sexuality remained within the new youth, brought up in the reality of Depression and lack of money. More important than dating, the views on marriage also changed drastically during the 30s, fuelled by economic factors. An unprecedented shift took place in the perception of marriage as a logical conclusion to prolonged dating: “the custom of going steady-a period between dating and engagement”[[12]](#footnote-12) evolved within the middle class, which was mostly affected by the Depression. It became more commonplace to “go all the way” within relationships not necessarily promising engagement and marriage in the long run. The phenomenon “living together” became widespread when the man simply refused to marry (out of lack of economical means, for example), and the woman moved into his house or let him stay at her place as the next big step in their relationships. A trade-off in these settings was the insecurity and instability of such relationships: “these affairs started on a plane of sexual excitement, deteriorated to a state of being used to each other, continued on a level of financial interdependence, and usually broke up when one or both partners got sexually excited by someone else”[[13]](#footnote-13). Another interesting phenomenon emerged as a product of Depression was the change in the outlook of women towards as life partners. In the Victorian Era the most desirable men were those with money, that is, men with high-paying jobs and/or family wealth. Now that Depression equalized many people in their misfortune, other types of men were viewed as acceptable life partners: sexual response and companionship in men were valued at the seam level as wealth. Therefore, “good dancers, athletes, good companions, good-looking boys and boys clever at sexual maneuvering became accepted at face value for boy-and-girl purposes, without immediate thoughts of marriage”[[14]](#footnote-14). Coincidence or not, but public nudity became to be viewed as more acceptable in the 30s: it was normal to see naked upper bodies of men on the beach as well as open female stomachs. The latter ones soon started to be seen on the streets and “even at social occasions”. The attitude towards sex changed once again: instead of a type of fun in the state of intoxication and excitement from being inside a car parked far from everyone’s eyes, sex became a type of sport enjoyed by young males and females, “a game for two, exciting, with emotional fireworks – but still, mostly a sport”[[15]](#footnote-15). Within these social constraints advertising took its niche and capitalized on changes in moral and social views.

As the well-being of Americans steadily increased during the 1920s, more attention started to be paid to one’s physical attraction. People started to socialize more often, women became more extravagant as their entered into originally men’s clubs as Flappers. Women had to look perfect, which, on top of being cheerful and slightly drunk, meant absence of B.O. (body odours), bad teeth and breath, and wearing of extra-clean clothing. Advertisers such as J. Walter Thompson was one of the pioneers who started to use fear, sex, and emulation appeals to persuade both women and men into buying products such as soap, shaving cream, mouthwashes, toothpastes, and other similar products. While fear mostly developed anxiety among women in respect to finding or keeping a man, losing a job and/or friends, sex appeal was mostly used in higher-end products like cigarettes, alcohol, and clothing. First, women and men had to take care of themselves out of fear of being socially-alienated, then, when the habit of being perfect was strongly engraved, they were persuaded into buying dreams. For example, packaging of cigarettes often featured beautiful slim ladies (Lucky Strike) or romantic settings featuring both man and woman (Chesterfield). The first type of sex appeal tried to sell cigarettes on the premises that they led to slim and appealing body types and voluptuous voices, desirable by men. The second one targeted women’s subconsciousness: in spite of the widespread sexual liberalisation, women still sought a lifetime partner. Men also had to abide by the same rules: clean faces, good smell, cigarettes and alcohol promised them the image of being successful among ladies. Because of these variables females were used in advertising extensively: sexually appealing ladies were placed on packaging of men’s beauty products (i.e. Barbasol shaving cream)[[16]](#footnote-16), while movie starts often featured on the packaging of cigarettes for women to serve as an ideal and a benchmark for the latter to strive towards. While the First Sexual Revolution was roaring due to many exogenous variables, advertisement industry fuelled it to make “things happen” for men and women.

During the 1930s the advertising industry tanked together with the economy. Extravaganza was not anymore a goal of the middle class. Rather, common people started to focus on more of what they had and slashed on buying luxuries. Nudity became more widespread in everyday products’ ads (i.e. Woodbury soap). On top of that, ads generally became less affluent in color and content. As marriages and child birth dropped, people became more focused on vocational tasks. Fear in advertising became more important than sex appeal (i.e. one could lose his jobs if his socks were not proper). Hand-in-hand advertising went with the popular culture and social changes in the American society. As mentioned before, health started to be promoted more in 1930s and sex became a type of sport. Sex appeal would, therefore, be imposed on beauty products rather than goods that made it “fun” in the state of intoxication in a parked car.

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